

Statement of

# **The Honorable Patrick Leahy**

United States Senator  
Vermont  
May 5, 2010

Statement Of Senator Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.)  
Chairman, Senate Committee On The Judiciary,  
Hearing On "The Increased Importance Of The Violence Against Women Act  
In A Time Of Economic Crisis"  
May 5, 2010

The Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) was a watershed piece of legislation that is as crucial now as it has ever been. Since its enactment 15 years ago, VAWA has provided critical, sometimes life-saving, assistance to countless survivors of domestic and dating violence, sexual assault, and stalking. This legislation shed light on the national problem of violence against women, and marked a bipartisan commitment to confront and end domestic and sexual violence.

Since that time, we have responded with better laws, social support, and coordinated community responses. I was proud to work on the original VAWA bill, and am pleased with all it has accomplished. Our communities and families are safer today because of this law. As we begin to consider the reauthorization of this vital law, it is important to note that, for all we have accomplished, there is more work to be done. The problem of domestic and sexual violence persists, and in a time of economic crisis, the victims of this violence are even more vulnerable.

The Violence Against Women Act has transformed our criminal justice system, improving the legal and law enforcement response to the complex issues of domestic and dating violence, sexual assault, and stalking. It has evolved to better address the needs of underserved populations and includes critical new programs focusing on prevention and on the needs of young people.

The importance of VAWA could not be clearer than it is today as our country copes with a troubled economy. The safety net VAWA has provided survivors over the years is now a lifeline for many. The economic pressures of a lost job, home, or car can add stress to an already abusive relationship. The loss of these resources can make it harder for victims to escape a violent situation. And just as victims' needs are growing, state budget cuts are resulting in fewer available services, including emergency shelters, transitional housing, counseling, and childcare.

These services can mean the difference between life and death for some victims. I advocated for increased funding of VAWA programs in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. I was pleased that the Recovery Act included \$50 million for the Transitional Housing Assistance Grants program, which has helped people across the country find a safe place to live.

As we look toward reauthorization of VAWA we must go further. We must increase access to support services, especially in rural communities and among older Americans. We must prioritize

our response to the high rates of violence experienced by Native American and immigrant women. And we must think of new and innovative ways to improve economic independence for survivors.

Economic insecurity is among the most formidable obstacles for survivors of domestic and sexual violence. Abusers often retain their control through economic dependence, sabotaging a victim's credit history or her ability to work productively. Between 25 and 50 percent of domestic violence victims report that they lost a job at least in part due to their abuse. Similarly, almost 50 percent of sexual assault survivors lose their jobs following a crime. Senator Murray, a longtime supporter of VAWA, has introduced a bill I am proud to cosponsor to provide victims with unpaid leave for legal and medical appointments, eligibility for unemployment insurance, and protection from employment and insurance discrimination based on their history of abuse. These policies make good business sense, and they are the right thing to do. We must take additional steps to ensure the economic independence of victims.

State and local government and community organizations nationwide recognize the power of economic independence for survivors and are implementing innovative programs to help achieve that goal. The Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence is at the forefront of this innovative approach. Leveraging private resources with federal, state and local financial support, the Vermont Network is able to help survivors with a variety of needs from budgeting to credit repair to employment counseling.

Today we will hear from Judge Susan Carbon, Director of the Office on Violence Against Women. Judge Carbon has led efforts to combat domestic violence at the state and the national level, and I look forward to hearing her perspective on this vital issue.

We will also hear from Auburn Watersong, an economic justice specialist at the Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence who has spearheaded many of the Vermont Network's innovative programs. I am proud to have worked with the Vermont Network and its executive director Karen Tronsgard-Scott for years. Sarah Kenney, also with the Vermont Network, is here in the audience today. We will also hear from Lolita Ulloa of the Victim Services Division at the Hennepin County Attorney's Office, a one-stop service center for victims of domestic violence whose success has now been replicated nationally. Finally, we will hear from Richard Gelles, Dean of the School of Social Policy & Practice at the University of Pennsylvania.

I look forward to working with members of this Committee, the Obama-Biden administration, and experts in the field to ensure that this law remains a vital resource for prosecutors, law enforcement agencies, victim service providers, and, most importantly, the individuals across the country who are coping with violence and abuse.

#####